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THE SANDMAN™

DISTANT·MIRRORS

AUGUST

by
NEIL GAIMAN
BRYAN TALBOT
STAN WOCH

THE BOY IS SIXTEEN.

HE WAITS IN THE DARKNESS, LISTENING FOR A FOOTFALL, FOR A SOUND.

HE IS NOT CRYING. HE IS NO BARBARIAN, NO GREEK TO GIVE IN TO HIS FEELINGS, TO HIS FEARS.

HE LIES AWAKE IN THE DARKNESS.

NOT CRYING.

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF THE DWARF LYCIUS:

I am old, now, and I no longer fear anything life could hold for me. I fear nothing save Death, the great inevitable, and my death is not far distant.

Thus the time has come in these memoirs for me to chronicle certain matters I know of; and I am the only one alive who knows them.

AVGVST

NEIL GAIMAN: WRITER BRYAN TALBOT: PENCILS
STAN WOCH: INKS DANIEL VOZZO: COLORS
TODD KLEIN: LETTERS ALISA KWITNEY: ASST. ED.
KAREN BERGER: MOTHER TO THE WORLD
SANDMAN CHARACTERS CREATED BY NEIL GAIMAN, SAM KIETH AND MIKE DRINGENBERG

The things I write, I witnessed directly, or I was told, by our first emperor, who was a man, and is now a god.

I speak of **him who was** born Caius Octavius: who later took the name Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus; he who, later still, the whole of the world, Roman and barbarian, was to know as the Emperor Augustus.

DWARF. WHAT FOOLISHNESS BRINGS YOU HERE?

LADY LIVIA. YOU'RE UP EARLY. I AM HERE ON THE EMPEROR'S ORDERS.

HMMPH. YES. I WAS AFRAID OF THAT.

WELL, YOU'LL FIND HIM THROUGH THERE.

DWARF? HAVE YOU BROUGHT EVERYTHING?

YES, SIR.

WHAT IS IT?

THEY CALL IT THE SCALDRUM DODGE, SIR.

AND YOU ACTORS LEARN THIS?

NO, SIR. THIS IS FROM PERSIA, SIR. A MERCHANT SHOWED IT TO ME.

SOME OF THEIR BEGGARS MUTILATE THEMSELVES, TO LIVE. BUT A FEW DO THIS INSTEAD. SIR.

PLEASE, DWARF. NOT "SIR." NOT TODAY. TODAY I WILL BE CAIUS.

YES... CAIUS.

THIS IS "SOAP"-- A MIXTURE OF BONE AND FAT AND ASHES. THE WOMEN USE IT TO CLEAN CLOTHES, AT THE RIVER.

FIRST WE SMEAR IT ON OUR FACES AND ARMS.

IT SMELLS FOUL, DWARF.

MM. MY APOLOGIES.

LYCIUS. IF YOU ARE CAIUS, THEN I AM LYCIUS.

AND BEGGARS HAVE NEVER BEEN RENOWNED FOR THEIR FRAGRANCE.

LYCIUS.

THERE. IT SHOULD BE DRY BY NOW.

THEN WE SPRINKLE ON A BIT OF THIS.

FAUGH. IT SMELLS LIKE VINEGAR.

IT IS VINEGAR. SEE? THE SOAP BLISTERS -- AND TO ANY PASSER-BY, YOUR SKIN APPEARS BURNED AND ULCERATED.

REMARKABLE. QUICKER THAN BOILED ASPARAGUS.

NOW: LET US SEE WHAT THE MARKET HAS IN STORE FOR US.

WELL? ARE YOU READY, SIR?

CAIUS. PLEASE. REMEMBER THAT TODAY WE ARE BEGGARS TOGETHER, FRIEND LYCIUS.

THAT'S A LOVELY TEMPLE, CAIUS.

THE TEMPLE OF AVENGING MARS? INDEED.

HOW OLD ARE YOU, LYCIUS?

TWENTY-TWO, SIR. UH, CAIUS.

AH. YOU WOULD NOT REMEMBER ROME AS IT WAS, WHEN I WAS YOUNGER. I AM ALMOST SEVENTY. THE GODS HAVE GIVEN ME LONG LIFE...

I PAID FOR THAT TEMPLE, LYCIUS. AS I BUILT SO MUCH OF ROME; AND OTHERS FOLLOWED MY EXAMPLE.

I FOUND IT IN BRICK, AND I HAVE LEFT IT CLAD IN FINEST MARBLE.

THERE'S SOME FOOD IN MY POUCH, CAIUS, IF YOU ARE HUNGRY.

I HAVE EATEN. DRIED DATES, A FEW RAISINS, A GLASS OF WATERED WINE; THAT WILL SATISFY ME, UNTIL THIS EVENING. I SELDOM EAT MUCH.

REALLY? GOSH. I THOUGHT THAT, WELL, YOU'D EAT LARKS' TONGUES, AND SOWS UDDERS, ALL THAT. FANCY STUFF. I WOULD, IF I WERE EMPEROR.

HIT THE VOMITORIUM AND BACK AGAIN FOR MORE...

BUT YOU ARE NOT EMPEROR, ARE YOU, LYCIUS?

AND, UNTIL THE SUN SETS TONIGHT, NEITHER AM I.

YOU NEVER PUT DOWN AN EMPTY BEGGING BOWL, CAIUS. PUT IN A PENNY, AND OTHERS WILL FOLLOW IT.

HMPH. AND THIS IS SOMETHING ELSE YOU ACTORS LEARN, EH?

BEGGARS' LORE, NOT ACTORS', CAIUS.

ACTORS... I DON'T LIKE ACTORS. IT'S A PROFESSION BASED ON LIES AND DISRESPECT. PRETENDING TO BE WHAT YOU ARE NOT.

NO. YOU HAVEN'T BEEN GOOD TO ACTORS, HAVE YOU? YOU BANNED ANY MEN OF NOBLE BIRTH FROM THE STAGE.

I LET YOU REMAIN ON THE STAGE, LYCIUS.

I'M THE ONLY ONE. AND LOOK AT ME. WHAT ELSE AM I GOING TO DO?

I SEE YOUR POINT, LYCIUS. TODAY I NEED AN ACTOR. TODAY I TOO AM AN ACTOR.

YES. WELL, LET'S HOPE YOU DO BETTER THAN PYLADES, EH?

PYLADES WAS A DOLT. HE DESERVED HIS BANISHMENT.

HE ONLY GAVE THE AUDIENCE THE FINGER, WHEN THEY HISSED HIM. YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO BANISH HIM.

I'VE HEARD PEOPLE BE RUDE AS SHIT TO YOU, YOU DIDN'T BAT AN EYELID.

I AM A MAN. I MATTER LITTLE.

PYLADES WAS DISRESPECTFUL TO ROME. HE WAS LUCKY I DIDN'T HAVE HIM KILLED. ACTORS.

CHINK!

THANK YOU, CITIZEN. MAY THE GODS BLESS YOU AND GIVE YOU VIRTUOUS CHILDREN.

CAIUS?

YES?

WHY ARE YOU *DOING* THIS?

HMM? OH, I HAD A DREAM.

I ONCE HAD A DREAM, THAT GOLD WAS BURIED BENEATH AN OLIVE TREE, ON MY FATHER'S ESTATE. AND I DUG FOR A DAY, BUT FOUND NOTHING.

AH. MANY DREAMS COME THROUGH THE GATES OF IVORY, LYCIUS, AND THEY *LIE*. A *FEW* DREAMS COME THROUGH THE GATES OF HORN, AND *THEY* SPEAK TO US TRULY.

EVERY SPRING I HAVE *TERRIBLE* DREAMS-- EVIL, DARK DREAMS-- BUT THEY ARE LIES. THEY ARE NOT TRUE DREAMS.

BUT THERE *ARE* TRUE DREAMS. MY LIFE WAS SAVED, IN PHILLIPI, BY A DREAM.

ONCE THE CAPITALINE JUPITER *HIMSELF* APPEARED TO ME IN A DREAM. AND THEN...

AND THEN THERE WAS THE DREAM THAT SENT ME HERE. IF DREAM IT WAS...

ONCE I DREAMED THAT THE DIVINE JULIUS *HIMSELF* APPEARED TO ME ON STAGE, WHEN I FORGOT MY LINES.

WE WERE APPEARING IN PLAUTUS'S *MENAECHMUS* -- PLAYING THE TWINS. HEHEH.

CAN YOU *BELIEVE* THAT? NO ONE COULD TELL US APART...

JULIUS CAESAR. I WISH I'D KNOWN HIM.

I KNEW HIM.

WELL, OF *COURSE* YOU DID. HE WAS YOUR FATHER.

ADOPTED FATHER, LYCIUS. HE WAS MY GRANDMOTHER'S BROTHER. HER NAME WAS JULIA. I FIRST MET HIM AT HER FUNERAL...

THE BOY IS TWELVE. HIS GRANDMOTHER'S PYRE BURNS FIERCELY IN THE SUMMER HEAT.

HE READS THE ORATION WITH PRIDE: PRIDE IN HIS LINEAGE, PRIDE IN THE REPUBLIC.

THE BOY MISSES HIS GRANDMOTHER. HE DOES NOT CRY.

THE MAN ARRIVES LATE; THE BOY HAS NEVER SEEN HIM BEFORE, BUT THERE IS NO MISTAKING HIM.

HIS UNCLE. HIS HERO.

HIS GOD.

...HIS *EYES*. THAT'S WHAT I REMEMBER... THE FIRST TIME. HIS EYES.

FAMILY. IT MUST BE *NICE* TO HAVE A PROPER FAMILY. MINE ARE SORT OF *EMBARRASSED* BY ME. THEY'RE OKAY, IN THEIR WAY...

FAMILY. THE FAMILY IS THE FOUNDATION STONE ON WHICH THE EMPIRE IS BUILT.

I DON'T *HAVE* ANY CHILDREN, *OR* A WIFE. PROBABLY NEVER WILL.

I DON'T HAVE CHILDREN: I HAVE *RUNNING SORES*. A DAUGHTER WHO *SHAMED* ME; AND MY GRAND-DAUGHTER JULIA... HER LEGS MUST HAVE GAPED FOR HALF OF ROME... MEN *AND* WOMEN...

THANK YOU, LADY. MAY THE GODS SEND YOU MANY CHILDREN.

RUNNING SORES...

AREN'T YOU GOING TO GIVE HIM A COIN, MARCUS?

WHY? IF IT IS THE GODS' WILL THAT HE CANNOT WORK, THEN LET THE GODS FEED HIM AND GIVE HIM COINS.

HE'D PISS HIMSELF IF HE KNEW WHO YOU REALLY WERE.

UNDOUBTEDLY. BUT HE HAD A POINT. WE CANNOT DEFY THE GODS.

MM. I HAVE THREE DUTIES, LYCIUS. I AM HEAD OF THE STATE. I AM HEAD OF THE ARMY. AND I AM THE CHIEF PRIEST.

I... SOMETIMES DOUBT THE GODS EXIST. I HAVE NEVER SEEN ONE...

EXCEPT... DURING MY ELEUSINEAN INITIATION, I THOUGHT I HEARD VOICES...

WHEN WE ARE INITIATED INTO THE MYSTERIES OF ELEUSIS, WE SEE AND HEAR MANY STRANGE THINGS.

NO: THE GODS EXIST. I HAVE SEEN THEM. AND THERE ARE OTHERS, WHO STAND BEHIND THE GODS...

...THOSE WHOM EVEN JUPITER MUST OWN HIS SUPERIORS.

EH? WHO COULD BE GREATER THAN JUPITER THE GREATEST AND MOST POWERFUL?

HM. FIRSTLY, TERMINUS, THE GOD OF BOUNDARIES. JUPITER MUST BOW TO HIM; BOUNDARIES ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THINGS, LYCIUS.

AND SECONDLY... BUT I DO NOT KNOW WHO THEY ARE.

THEY ARE WHISPERED OF IN THE INNER MYSTERIES: THE SEVEN, WHO ARE NOT PRAYED TO, WHO ARE NOT GODS, WHO WERE NEVER MEN.

THE DIVINE JULIUS IS NOW A GOD. I WONDER WHAT IT'S LIKE, BEING A GOD.

I WILL BE A GOD, WHEN I DIE, LYCIUS. ALREADY THEY BEGIN TO WEAVE STORIES ABOUT ME, PRESAGING MY DIVINITY.

THEY SAY THAT MY MOTHER, ATIA, FELL ASLEEP AT THE TEMPLE OF APOLLO, AND A SNAKE MADE ITS WAY INTO HER WOMB, AND FERTILIZED HER.

AND IS IT TRUE?

OF COURSE NOT. MY MOTHER WAS ENTERED BY NOTHING MORE REMARKABLE THAN MY FATHER'S PENIS.

WHEN I WAS A *BOY* I PRAYED TO MERCURY OF THE PHYSICIANS, TO MAKE ME TALLER.

BUT I *THINK* MY PRAYERS WERE HEARD BY APOLLO, WHO GAVE ME A POWERFUL VOICE, AND A GOOD MEMORY, AND SENT ME TO THE STAGE.

IT WILL BE *GOOD* TO BE DEAD--TO BE A GOD.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IT WILL BE LIKE?

ALL MY MISTAKES WILL BE FORGOTTEN. ALL MY CRIMES WILL BE FORGIVEN...

DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY MEN I HAVE PERSONALLY KILLED? HOW MANY DEATHS I HAVE ORDERED?

NO.

NEITHER DO I. I LOST COUNT, MANY, MANY YEARS AGO.

UM.

I HAVE DONE MANY EVIL THINGS. BUT THEY WERE ALL TO PRESERVE ROME.

AND I WILL BE A *GOD*.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THAT, AND WHAT YOU'VE GOT *NOW*?

I MEAN, YOU'VE GOT THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH OVER, *WHAT*? A HUNDRED MILLION PEOPLE?

YOUR RULE EXTENDS FROM THE STORMY COASTS OF GAUL TO THE STINKING DESERTS OF JUDEA.

EVERYBODY *LOVES* YOU.

WELL, MAYBE NOT *EVERYBODY*. BUT YOU'RE HEAPS BETTER THAN CHAOS.

YOU GAVE THE ARMY BOUNTY, YOU GAVE THE PEOPLE CHEAP CORN, YOU GAVE THE WHOLE EMPIRE BLESSED PEACE.

YOU'RE *PRACTICALLY* A GOD ALREADY.

WHEN *I* AM A *GOD* I WILL NO LONGER BE *SCARED*.

THE OLD MAN WAKES IN THE NIGHT, SWEATING AND COLD.

HE LISTENS TO THE SILENCE, FOR ONE SICK MOMENT AFRAID THAT HE HAS FALLEN BACK IN TIME; IS ONCE MORE A QUIVERING BOY...

IN THE DARKNESS HE FEARS THAT THE WHOLE OF HIS LIFE SINCE THAT BLACK NIGHT HAS BEEN NOTHING MORE THAN A FEVER'S DREAM.

HE SHOUTS FOR A STORYTELLER. THERE IS ALWAYS A STORYTELLER WAITING IN THE ANTEROOM.

THE OLD MAN SLEEPS ALONE, BUT SOLITUDE SCARES HIM.

THE GAUDY TALES OF BRASS MEN AND DRAGONS' TEETH COMFORT HIM, AND, A CHILD AGAIN, HE SLEEPS.

WHERE *ARE* THEY ALL?

THEY'VE GONE INDOORS. IT'S MID-DAY. ONLY MAD DOGS, BRITONS, AND BEGGARS STAY OUT IN THIS HEAT.

HOW MUCH HAVE WE MADE SO FAR?

FOUR COPPER ASES, A BRASS DUPONDIUS--RATHER BADLY CLIPPED--*AND* A SESTERCIUS. PROBABLY *COUNTERFEIT.*

IT'S A GOOD THING THAT WE AREN'T DOING IT FOR THE *MONEY,* THEN.

WHY *ARE* WE DOING IT?

LATER.

...AS I SAID, THE FIRST TIME I MET HIM WAS AT GRANDMOTHER'S FUNERAL.

I SAW HIM *NEXT* WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN. HE WAS CAMPAIGNING IN SPAIN. HE *SENT* FOR ME.

I WAS SO EXCITED.

"IN HINDSIGHT, THE JOURNEY MUST HAVE BEEN A *NIGHTMARE*.

"BUT AT THE TIME IT WAS AN *ADVENTURE*--A BOYS' STORY. I WAS STILL CONVALESCING FROM ILLNESS...

"IT WAS A CHAPTER OF *DISASTERS*: *FIRST* WE WERE *SHIPWRECKED*, THEN I WAS FORCED TO *FIGHT* MY WAY ACROSS COUNTRY HELD BY THE ENEMY--JUST TO BE *WITH* HIM."

HE WAS MY *UNCLE*, YOU SEE. HE WAS THE GREATEST MAN IN THE WORLD. HE WAS MY HERO. AND HE WAS *CAESAR*.

I SPENT SOME TIME WITH HIM, IN SPAIN.

HE WAS TO HAVE TAKEN ME ON HIS NEXT EXPEDITION; HE PLANNED TO HAVE ME *ALWAYS* BY HIS SIDE.

"I WENT ON TO APOLLONIA, TO *WAIT* FOR HIM, AND IT WAS THERE THAT I HEARD HE HAD BEEN *ASSASSINATED*, AND HAD NAMED ME AS HIS HEIR.

"I WAS EIGHTEEN, AND I LEFT THAT DAY FOR ROME, TO *AVENGE* HIM."

YOU MUST HAVE LOVED HIM VERY MUCH.

MM?

NO. I HATED HIM.

...WHAT WAS IT *LIKE*, LYCIUS? IN THE DAYS OF THE REPUBLIC?

IT WAS *CHAOS*, HELD AT BAY BY A HANDFUL OF MEN: *CICERO*, FOR EXAMPLE.

THE *LAWYER*? MY FATHER'S TOLD ME ABOUT HIM. HE WAS A GREAT MAN, WASN'T HE?

YES. A *FINE MIND*, AND AN *HONORABLE MAN*. THE LAST OF THE GIANTS.

CICERO...

WHATEVER *HAPPENED* TO HIM?

I HAD HIM KILLED.

OH.

I AM *NOT* A VAIN MAN, LYCIUS.

I NEVER SAID YOU WERE.

THIS *NAME* I HAVE TAKEN: *AUGUSTUS*. IT WAS *NOT* TAKEN FROM *VANITY*, BUT FROM *PIETY*, TRUSTING THAT MY REIGN WOULD *AUGUR* WELL FOR *ROME*.

YOU NAMED THIS *MONTH* AFTER YOU, THOUGH. IT *USED* TO BE *SEXTILUS*. *NOW* IT'S *AUGUST*. YOU DID THAT.

THAT WILL NOT LAST. IN ANOTHER DECADE THIS MONTH WILL PROBABLY BE CALLED *TIBERIUS*...

WE WRITE OUR NAMES IN THE SAND; AND THEN THE WAVES ROLL IN AND WASH THEM AWAY.

BUT WE CAN LEAVE THINGS BEHIND US.

I AM LEAVING AN EMPIRE.

WHY AREN'T YOU KING?

NAMES... NAMES. THEY OFFERED JULIUS CAESAR THE CROWN, AND *HE* REFUSED IT. THAT'S REASON ENOUGH.

THE ROMANS ARE A *PROUD* PEOPLE. THEY WOULD NOT PERMIT THEMSELVES TO BE RULED BY A *KING*.

SO I CALL MYSELF *IMPERATOR*--COMMANDER. AND THEY FOLLOW ME, AND OBEY ME AS THEY WOULD A KING.

PEOPLE *FASCINATE* ME, LYCIUS.

IT IS WITHIN MY POWER TO GIVE THEM BACK A *REPUBLIC*. I ALMOST DID, TWICE, WHEN I WAS *SCARED* AND *WEAK*.

AND IT IS WITHIN THEIR POWER TO TAKE BACK ALL POWER FROM ME; BUT THEY *WILL* NOT.

HUMANITY. THEY FOLLOW LEADERS--QUEENS OR KINGS, CHIEFS OR EMPERORS. WE *TELL* THEM WHAT TO DO, AND THEY *DO* IT.

WE KNOW NO MORE THAN THEY, BUT STILL, THEY FOLLOW US, BLINDLY, AS PEOPLE LOST IN THE CATACOMBS WOULD FOLLOW A CHILD CARRYING A FLAMING TORCH.

AND WHAT DO *YOU* FOLLOW THEN, YOU LEADERS-- TO MAKE US FOLLOW YOU, AND OBEY YOU?

WE FOLLOW OUR *DREAMS*.

YOU. HERE. FIVE ASES.

THANK YOU, SIR. THAT IS VERY GENEROUS OF YOU.

ONCE I WAS A SLAVE. BUT I WAS FREED IN MY MASTER'S WILL, AND I TOOK WHAT I HAD SAVED, AND BECAME A WINE-SELLER. THE GODS SMILED UPON ME, AND NOW I OWN TWO SHIPS, AND HAVE FIFTY SLAVES OF MY OWN.

WE KNOW NOT WHAT TOMORROW BRINGS; AND BUT FOR THE WHIM OF THE GODDESS FORTUNA I MYSELF MIGHT BE SITTING IN THE MARKET PLACE, BEGGING FOR COPPER ASES.

NO MAN KNOWS THE FUTURE. IT BEHOOVES US ALL TO WALK WITH CARE.

I KNOW THE FUTURE. OR SOME OF IT.

FROM DREAMS?

...NO. FROM *BOOKS*. WHEN MARCUS LEPIDUS DIED, AND I TOOK THE OFFICE OF CHIEF PRIEST, I ORDERED BROUGHT TO ME ALL THE VOLUMES OF PROPHECY.

I *READ* THEM ALL. THEN I ORDERED 2,000 OF THEM BURNT. THE ONES I LEFT I EDITED AND HAD RECOPIED ...THE PROPHECIES WERE OBSCURE, BUT NOT *THAT* OBSCURE.

THERE ARE *TWO* FUTURES, YOU SEE. *TWO* WAYS THAT IT CAN GO.

IN *ONE* FUTURE, THE ROMANS SPUTTER AND FLARE LIKE GREEK FIRE, LAST A FEW HUNDRED YEARS AND THEN ARE *GONE*-- EATEN FROM OUTSIDE BY BARBARIANS, FROM INSIDE BY STRANGE GODS.

IN THE *OTHER* FUTURE THE WHOLE *WORLD* BECOMES A PROVINCE OF OUR EMPIRE: THE EAGLE STANDARD WILL BE CARRIED THROUGH LANDS WE HAVE BARELY *DREAMED* OF.

THERE ARE NATIONS BEYOND THE SUNSET, WHERE WE WILL RULE GOLDEN ZIGGURATS; AND NATIONS TO THE SOUTH WHERE DIAMONDS LIE LIKE ROBINS' EGGS UPON THE GROUND...

IT WILL BE A FINE WORLD, A GREAT AND GLORIOUS WORLD; AND THAT EMPIRE WILL LAST FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS. OR *MORE*.

THE PROPHECIES WERE QUITE *CLEAR* ON *THAT*.

THEY WERE CLEAR ON WHAT I HAD TO DO.

SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT. THERE ARE TWO FUTURES, AND YOU PICKED ONE OF THEM. FROM THE PROPHECIES. AND DESTROYED THE OTHERS.

YES. YES I DID.

CAESAR KNEW.

LATE AT NIGHT, HE WOULD TALK TO ME, IN SPAIN. TELL ME ABOUT HIS DREAMS. HE WAS A *BIG* MAN.

AND HIS DREAMS FOR ROME WERE BIG.

ARE YOU *SCARED* OF ME?

SCARED OF YOU? *LORD...*

DON'T *CALL* ME THAT.

WHEN I FIRST SUMMONED YOU, TOLD YOU WHAT I NEEDED TODAY; THAT I WOULD BE SPENDING A DAY DISGUISED AS A BEGGAR, THAT YOU WOULD BE BY MY SIDE...

...WEREN'T YOU *SCARED*?

NO... CAIUS.

I'M AN OLD MAN. BUT YOU *SHOULD* FEAR ME.

AND *I AM* FAST.

AND *I AM* STRONG.

BUT BECAUSE IF *I* GAVE THE WORD TONIGHT, YOU WOULD *DISAPPEAR*, AND NO ONE WOULD EVEN DARE TO MENTION THAT YOU HAD EVER *EXISTED*.

NOT BECAUSE I'M FAST.

AND NOT BECAUSE I'M *STRONG*.

AND NO ONE WOULD DARE COMPLAIN. BECAUSE THE ALTERNATIVE TO ME IS CHAOS.

ALL RIGHT. I'M *SCARED* OF YOU. BUT I *STILL* WANT TO KNOW. *WHY* ARE YOU *BEGGING* IN THE *MARKET*?

BECAUSE...

BECAUSE I HAD A DREAM.

"LATE ONE NIGHT I WOKE, AS I HAVE WOKEN IN THE NIGHT MANY TIMES IN THE PAST."

"AND I CALLED FOR A STORYTELLER.

"THE MAN WHO CAME WAS NEW TO ME."

YOU! TELL ME A STORY.

A story, Octavian? Very well.

There was a child who loved and respected his uncle, and who feared the gods.

His uncle was a great general.

The boy counted the days until he would be old enough to ride out, to follow his uncle to war.

When he was sixteen, and in his own eyes already a man, the boy set off to be with his uncle.

To learn the arts of conquest.

And then, on his first night in his uncle's camp, weak from illness and excitement, the boy lay in his tent.

But something bad happened to him that night.

NO!

HOW DARE YOU!

WHO ARE YOU?

I am here to tell you a story, Caius Octavius. Because you wake every night, screaming.

YOU ARE A GOD.

I am no god. But I am here as a favor to a god.

A...FAVOR?

All gods begin in my realm, Caius Octavius. They walk your world for a span, and when they are old they return to my world, to die.

THIS IS A DREAM!

OF COURSE IT'S A DREAM, OCTAVIUS.

WHO ARE YOU?

WHEN I WAS A MAN, I WAS ARISTEAS OF MARMORA. BUT THAT WAS SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

...THE POET, WHO BECAME APOLLO'S RAVEN?

THEN YOU ARE APOLLO? I PRAY YOU, BE NOT APOLLO OF THE TORMENTS, BUT APOLLO OF SOME GENTLER ASPECT.

I am not Apollo. I am no sun god. But poets and dreamers are my people, and it is not unheard-of for us to be confused.

I am no little Roman dream god, no god of rhyme and madness. I am myself.

WHAT WILL YOU... WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH ME, LORD?

There is a way out of your dilemma, Octavius.

MY DILEMMA?

Indeed.

I do not do this for you, little emperor. I do it for another, who has asked me to intercede on your behalf.

THE DIVINE JULIUS?

Terminus. He who walks the boundaries.

He requested that I counsel a way out of your difficulties.

DO THEY KNOW, THEN? THE GODS?

Terminus knows.

You labor under a heavy burden; while you are emperor of Rome, the gods of Rome watch you. And you fear the gods...

...don't you?

...YES.

But you have plans, Augustus. Plans you do not wish the gods of Rome to know.

So, for a day in every year, do not be emperor.

WHAT? BUT... HOW?

Be a beggar, Augustus. Go to the market-place, and beg for coppers. Plan your course on that day; when the gods will not be watching.

AND THEN...

AND THEN I AWOKE.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

SOME MAN IN YOUR DREAMS TOLD YOU TO COME AND BEG IN THE MARKET PLACE, BECAUSE ... THE GODS CAN'T SEE YOU *THINKING*, HERE?

I BELIEVE THAT WAS WHAT HE WAS TELLING ME, *YES*.

AND YOU'VE BEEN WITH ME HERE TODAY, WHAT, TO *THINK*?

YES.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND. *WHICH* GOD ARE YOU SO *AFRAID* OF?

THE DIVINE JULIUS.

MY LIFE HAS BEEN SPENT FOLLOWING THE PATH HE LAID OUT FOR ME. HE GROOMED ME FOR THIS...

HE *KNEW* OF THE PROPHECIES. HE KNEW WHAT ROME COULD BECOME; AND HE TOLD ME, STEP BY STEP, WHAT I HAD TO DO. HOW I COULD AMASS ENOUGH PERSONAL POWER TO DO WHATEVER I NEEDED.

LOOK *AROUND* YOU, LYCIUS: PROSPERITY, PEACE. STABLE GOVERNMENT. ENOUGH GRAIN TO FILL EVERY BELLY IN THE EMPIRE.

I HAVE DONE *EVERYTHING* HE WANTED.

I HAVE DONE *EVERYTHING*...

SO WHAT HAVE YOU *DECIDED*, THEN?

IT IS A MATTER OF *BOUNDARIES*. OBSERVE: OUR EMPIRE -- MY EMPIRE -- IS BASED ON MILITARY CONQUEST.

AS LONG AS NEW COUNTRIES ARE BEING CONQUERED, AS LONG AS THE LEGIONS HAVE NEW TERRITORIES TO CONQUER...

SO?

...THEN ROME WILL LIVE.

TERMINUS IS THE ONLY GOD TO WHOM JUPITER MUST BOW.

GOODBYE, DWARF. WE WILL NEVER SPEAK TO EACH OTHER AGAIN. YOU WILL *NOT* TELL ANYONE OF THIS DAY, OR OF OUR TALK. KEEP THE COINS.

GOODBYE, AUGUSTUS CAESAR.

HAIL, CAESAR.

I'M GOING TO *SLEEP*. GET A STORYTELLER READY.

YES, CAESAR.

SO, TODAY, I WAS THE ACTOR.

OR PERHAPS TODAY... I DID NOT HAVE TO ACT.

THE BOY IS SIXTEEN. HE SLEEPS IN HIS OWN TENT. HE IS TIRED; AND HE IS ILL.

HIS UNCLE COMES TO HIS TENT, IN THE DARKNESS.

HIS UNCLE IS A GREAT MAN.

THE BOY IS TAKEN, BRUTALLY, HARSHLY, THERE IN THE NIGHT. HE OFFERS NO RESISTANCE.

"DO WHAT I SAY, AND I WILL *ADOPT* YOU AS MY *SON*. DO WHAT I SAY, AND YOU WILL *RULE* WHEN I AM *GONE*. DO WHAT I SAY, AND THE *WORLD* WILL BE *YOURS*."

THE BOY DOES WHAT HE IS TOLD.

HIS UNCLE IS PLEASED WITH HIM.

HE LIES AWAKE IN THE DARKNESS, NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, WAITING FOR HIS UNCLE; WAITING FOR THE PAIN.

AND NEVER CRYING.

That, then, is a true account of the day I spent with the Emperor of Rome, in the month that still bears his name.

I passed him in the market, two years later, to the day. And I tossed him a copper. And he smiled at me.

I am an old man, now, and Augustus Caesar has been dead for almost fifty years.

But since that day I have wondered, turning the question over and over in my mind: what could he have been afraid of? And what was he trying to do?

Perhaps I understand what he was trying to tell me better, now, in the dim light of hindsight.

Augustus's will set the bounds of the empire; forbade any further expansion.

And in his will Augustus also appointed Tiberius as his successor: our divine rulers have, since then, been successively evil, mad, foolish, and--now--all three.

Perhaps he achieved his goal, perhaps not.

But still I persist in wondering: what was Augustus afraid of? Why did he wake in the night, screaming...?

AVGVSTVS

Why was he angry? Why was he scared?

I do not know his secret; and Augustus has taken it with him.

To Olympus.

Or to the grave.

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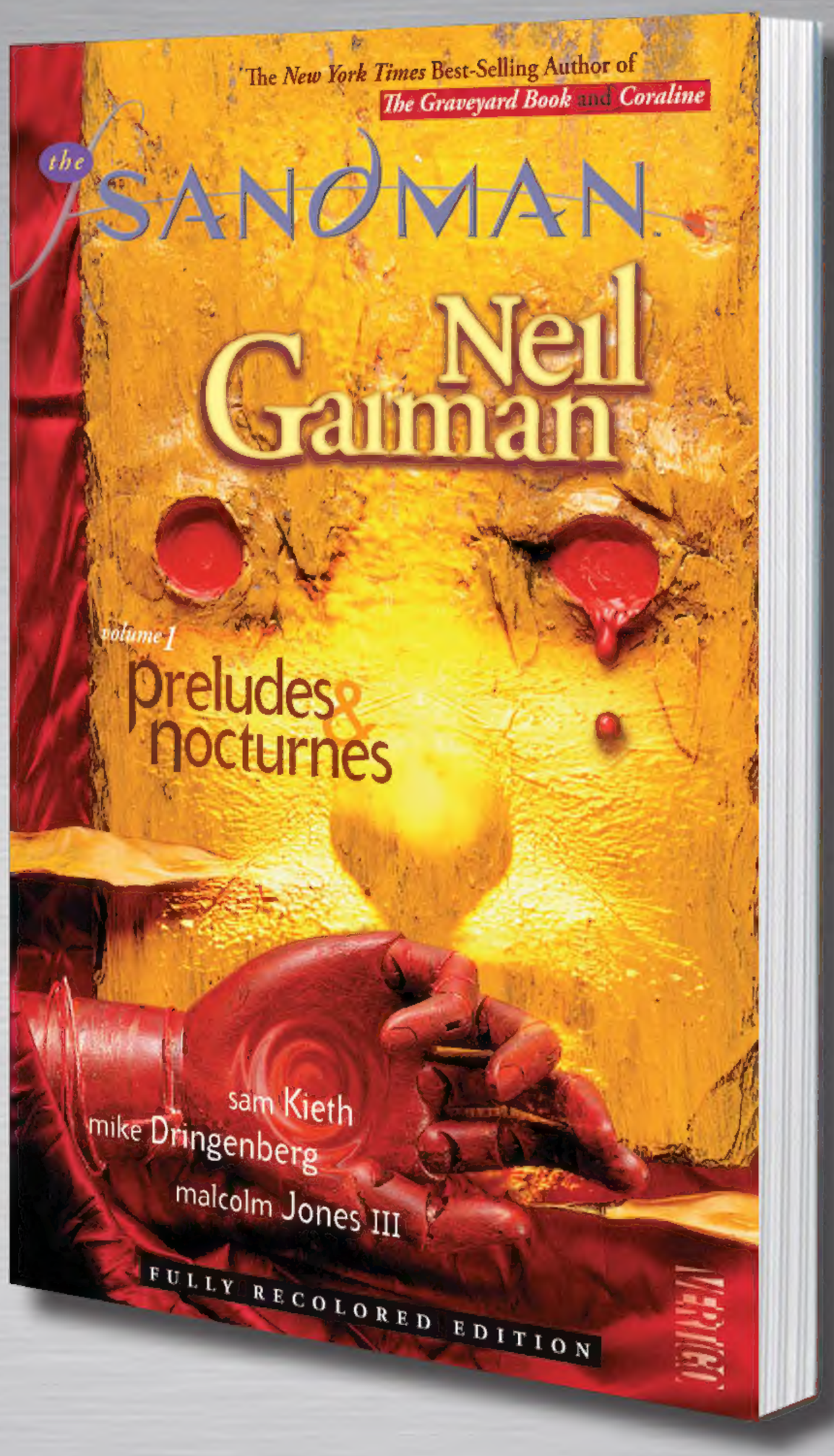
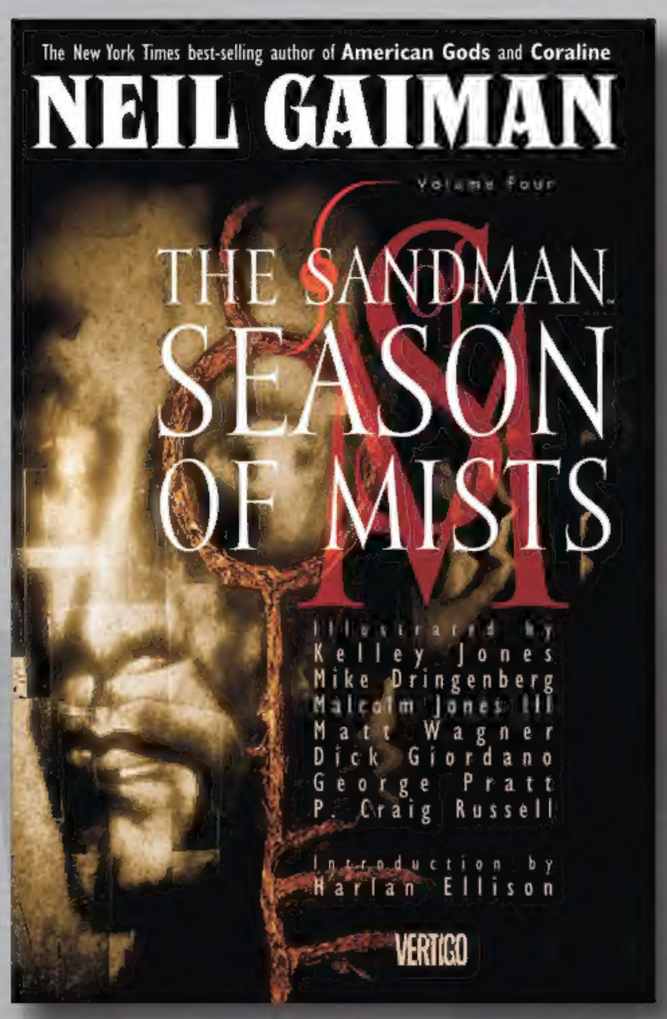


THE SANDMAN VOL. 4:
SEASON OF MISTS



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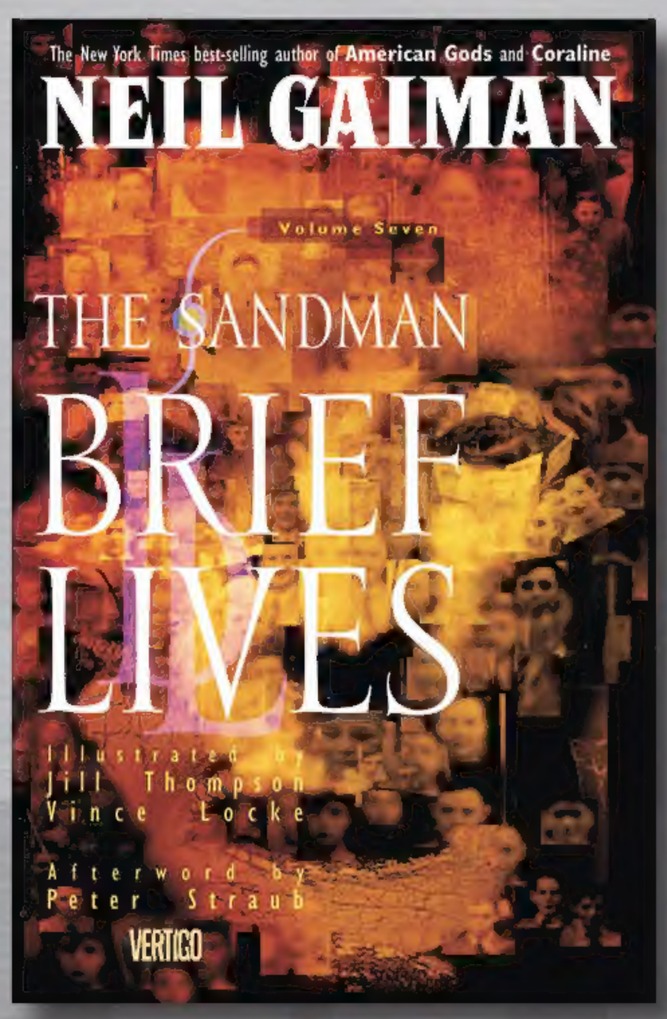
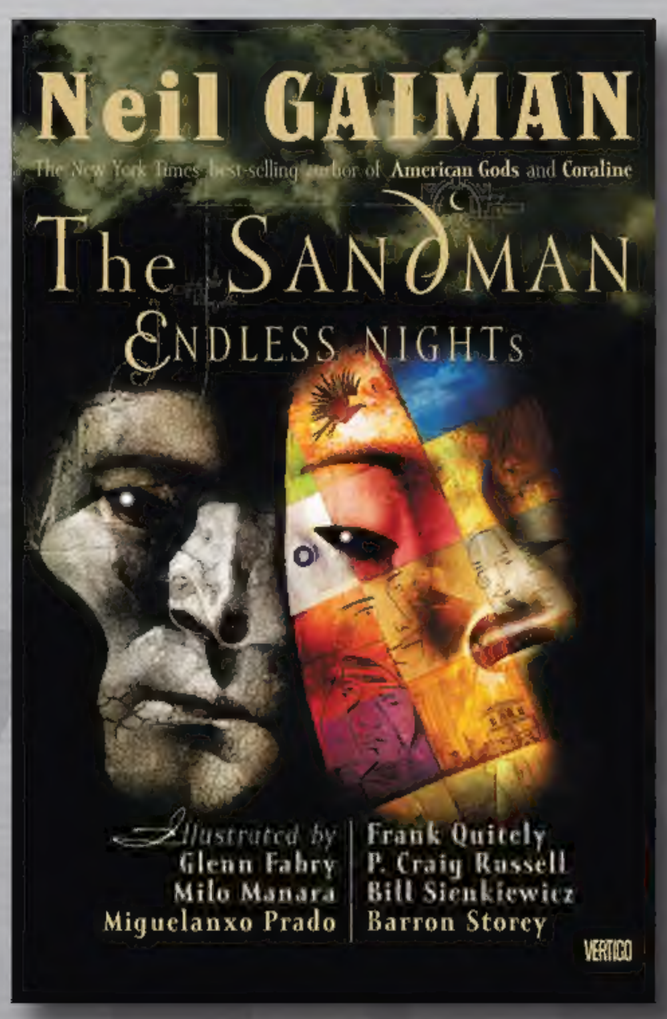


THE SANDMAN:
ENDLESS NIGHTS



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